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Ruth 1

Behind a Frowning Providence, He Hides a Smiling Face

In the 1940s, Nazi Germany invaded and occupied Holland. And in Holland was a remarkable Christian woman named Corrie ten Boom. She and her family famously joined the Dutch resistance against the Nazis, helping persecuted Jews escape, while also holding Bible studies and sharing the gospel. It's an incredible story. And as you can imagine, it's filled with pain, suffering, and heartache. But it's also filled with incredible stories of how God worked in and through tragic situations. As time went on, the Lord worked in many powerful ways, and they helped save many lives - but eventually, they were caught by the Nazis and taken to a concentration camp. It's hard to come up with a better example of human misery and suffering than that, right? Yet even there, they saw God working. Corrie describes the barracks they were crammed into and forced to live in - and they were absolutely awful. They were nasty, full of lice and fleas. As they enter, her sister Betsie recalled scripture and encouraged them to begin thanking the Lord for all these things, even the fleas. But Corrie, being a bit more of the honest realist, responded, "The fleas! This was too much. 'Betsie, there's no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.'" And who can blame her? But as it turned, because the barracks were so infested with lice and fleas, the Nazi guards hated to come there and never came to search their belongings - meaning they were able to smuggle in medicine to help other women, keep their Bibles and hymns they smuggled in, and even hold Bible studies with the other ladies, where some came to the Lord and were saved! As it turned out, she did eventually go on to thank the Lord for the lice and fleas.¹

Hearing a story like that is humbling, isn't it? It's hard to imagine a fate worse than being sent to a Nazi concentration camp. And yet there were Corrie and Betsie ten Boom, not only seeing the sovereign hand of God in it all, but thanking and praising Him along the way! The Bible makes it very clear, over and over again, that God is *sovereign* - that is, that God is completely in control, that He reigns over the universe. Now, when everything is going good in our lives, we probably don't have any problem affirming that, do we? It's easy to see God's hand at work in miraculous provision, when things are all going well, when the sun is shining. But what about when the sky turns gray and the bottom falls out? What about when the storm comes

¹ Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, chapter 13, "Ravensbruk."

into our life, bringing nothing but pain, misery, and suffering? Well in that moment, we might be tempted to think that God's sovereignty is no longer good news, but bad. We might start to grow bitter and angry with God, we might start to blame Him for our circumstances, accusing Him of injustice, of not caring for us, maybe even think that God is against us, out to get us. If we're honest, it takes a lot less suffering than a concentration camp to tempt us to think this way, doesn't it?

So how in the world could Corrie and Betsie ten Boom face the horrors of the concentration camp and not only still believe in the sovereignty of God, but also still praise, trust, and thank Him, in the face of all their terrible, beyond-difficult circumstances? How is it that they didn't grow bitter, angry, and blame God? It's because they knew that God is both completely sovereign, and also completely good, abounding in steadfast love, faithfulness, grace, and kindness. In the words of a 19th century hymn, "Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face." Even though we can't always interpret providence, even though we can't always understand what God is doing, we can trust that He is in control, and that means, we can trust in God's sovereign grace and kindness to work its way into all our circumstances. And that's exactly what I think we're supposed to see here in our text this morning, the first chapter of Ruth.

Last week, we finished up our sermon series in Judges. Ruth, the very next book in the Bible, picks up in the days of the Judges - which, as we've seen, were days full of spiritual and moral darkness. But here in this book, we see a glorious, bright light of hope dawning amidst that darkness. It's a sweet, beautiful story about God working out His sovereign plans of grace and kindness, of provision, of redemption, even salvation, for His people. It's a sweet story about family, faith, loyalty, integrity, romance, redemption, and ultimately, points us to God's promise of the Messiah-King, Jesus Christ.

But here in the first chapter, Act 1 of the story, we first have to see the *crisis* facing a small Israelite family, setting the stage for God's sovereign grace to be seen clearly.

So first, we see, in point 1...

I. You Can't Escape the Sovereignty of God (1:1-5)

Our story begins in vv.1: "In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons." Over the last couple of months, as we've just finished our preaching series through the book of Judges, we've seen that "In the days when the judges ruled" refers to very

dark days, full of sin and idolatry - and, consequently, they were days full of the judgment of God against Israel. Through Judges, we saw, over and over again, Israel do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, sin and commit idolatry, and then the Lord brought judgment and wrath upon them - most often, through the invasion and oppression of their enemies. So when chapter 1 begins placing the story of Ruth in the days of the Judges, such a setting reminds us of this pattern of Israel's sin and God's judgment. In fact, I think we're meant to see this "famine" as yet another episode of God's judgment against Israel. After all, Leviticus 26 and Deut. 28 made clear that if Israel broke His Law, sinned against God, and went after false gods, then God would bring covenant curses upon Israel - part of which included *famine in the land* (Lev. 26:18-20 and Deut. 28:23-24). And the whole point of such judgment was for Israel to repent from their sin and turn back to the Lord in faith.

But here we see a family that instead decides to just bypass the whole judgment and repentance pattern. Elimelech and his family get out of dodge. Famine comes; Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," is all out of bread! So they leave Israel and head for Moab, a pagan nation nearby that has a long history of being Israel's enemies. In the book of Numbers, they don't let Israel pass through, but attack them; the king gets Balaam to try and curse them, and then they send women to lead Israel's men astray, seducing them to their pagan gods. In Judges, we saw them attacking and invading Israel. Clearly, this family leaving Israel to go to their pagan enemies next door, Moab, is not a good sign. It seems to heavily imply that they were trying find a loophole in the whole "judgment and repentance" plan God had for Israel; instead of trusting in the lord when famine came, they decided to throw in their lot with their pagan enemies. But you escape God; His sovereignty doesn't stop at the nation borders of Israel; He is sovereign over the whole earth.

Furthermore, when they get to Moab, instead of them obeying God, we see them continuing to do what is right in their own eyes, as all of Israel did in these days, just like we saw last week. Elimelech's sons, Mahlon and Chilion, both marry Moabite women: Ruth and Orpah. But the Law of Moses made it *forbidden*, a sin against God, to marry pagan, non-Jewish, idolatrous people - like women from Moab were.² In fact, Numb. 23:3-7, explicitly forbids

² See, for example, Deut. 7:3-4, where Israel is commanded not to marry the pagan, idolatrous Canaanites. Moabites aren't listed here, but the spirit of the law remains the same: Moabites were pagan and idolatrous people, with a history of being Israel's enemies and leading Israel away into idolatry. This is confirmed in Ezra 9, where Ezra explicitly rebukes Israelites for marry Moabites (among other foreigners), and even alludes to Deut. 7:3-4, applying it to moabites as well.

Moabites, and their descendants, from being part of the assembly of the Lord. So this is further evidence that these men are doing what's right in their eyes, not what's right in the Lord's eyes. They are subverting, rebelling against God's authority. God is sovereign - that is, God is *the sovereign*, the King, the ruler, over all things. What He says is good, true, and right; and that means. Because God is sovereign, we are all obligated to obey and honor Him. But every time we sin, everytime we disobey God, we're saying with our actions that we don't think God should be in charge of our lives. Anytime we disobey God, anytime we don't do what He tells us to do, or when we do what God tells us *not* to do, this is called sin - and we do it because we think we know better than God does. When we think we know better than God, when we try to find loopholes around God's plans, we're trying to take God off the throne, trying to dethrone God of His sovereign rule and authority, and we're trying to place *ourselves* on the throne of our lives. When we sin, we're trying to escape the authority of God and make *ourselves* king and god. But you can't do that - you can't overthrow God. And you can't escape GOD's sovereign rule and authority over your life, over all things. And this means you can't escape God's judgment.

And that's exactly what comes upon Elimelech's family here, in vv.3-5. First, the father, Elimelech, dies. Then, after the two sons marry Moabite women, and they live in Moab for 10 years, both women remain childless - which is another sign of God's covenant curses that we see in Deut. 28 (v.18). (And lest anyone misunderstand, let me just make clear here that those covenant curses were for Old Testament Israel, not Chrstians today; just because a Christian is childless or infertile does not, by any means, mean that they are under God's curse!) But in this context, it's another sign of God's judgment on this family. And then, the last two men, the sons, both die. And I think the point is clear: try as they might, they could not escape the sovereign rule and authority of God. They couldn't escape it by leaving Israel. They couldn't get around it by doing what they thought was right. And they couldn't escape God's judgment - it came upon them in the end, even in Moab. God's sovereignty, including His authority and judgment, knows no bounds - it encompasses the whole universe!

And that means you and I can't escape it either. Like it or not, God is sovereign over all things. He works "all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). And this means God is the *sovereign ruler, the authoritative King* over all. "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens and His kingdom rules over all" (Psalm 103:19). Let us not be blinded by sin and do what we think is right in our own eyes. Don't rebel against GOD, don't try to get

around His authority - it's not going to work. And that's because you can't escape the sovereign judgment of God. There are always consequences for sin - either in this life, or in the next. One day, when we die, we will all stand before the throne of God - and since we've all sinned, we all deserve His righteous judgment; we deserve death, God's wrath, even eternal Hell! We can't escape this judgment on our own - we can't overthrow God's authority, and we can't come up with our own solutions to escape God's judgment! Our good works and religious rituals won't cut it. There are no loopholes. There's nowhere to run - escape one place: we must *run to God for salvation*, not from Him. You can't escape God's sovereignty - but you *can trust in the sovereign God!* And that's because God's sovereignty is a *good thing* - because God is both sovereign *and good*. Which brings us to point 2...

II. The Sovereignty of God Works Out Grace and Kindness for His People (1:6-18)

The story now focuses on Naomi. She's now a widow, bereaved of her sons, in a foreign pagan land, with no financial security, no hope. And yet, even here, amidst the darkness, the light of God's grace shines. We read in v.6, "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food." First off, we see God's gracious providence at work here - he has directly brought aid to Israel, mercifully relieving the famine and providing food for His people. And it's also a mark of God's grace that, even in the far, foreign fields of Moab, the poor, widowed Naomi not only *heard* of God's provision (in a day long before internet and telephones), but was also able to travel back! And on their journey back, we have our first dialogue, between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. In vv.8-9, Naomi tries to convince Orpah and Ruth to leave her, to go back to their families and get re-married: "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" She blesses them in the name of the Lord, in a significant way: she asks the Lord to "deal kindly" with them - that is, for God to show them *hesed* - a Hebrew word that is theologically loaded; it's hard to translate, meaning loving kindness, of steadfast love, covenant loyalty - a word very often used to describe God's gracious kindness and faithful love to His people. And she remarks that Ruth and Orpah themselves have even been a picture of such kindness to her! They've stuck by her, even after their husbands died, treating her like a mother - they're even both prepared to journey to Israel

with her, a land foreign to them, in v.10! This is another evidence of God's gracious providence at work.

But Naomi persists in telling them to go back, in vv.11-13, telling them that it would be foolish for them to come with her, since she has no sons left for them to marry (referring to Levirate marriage, part of the Law and customs of Israel). She gives several reasons: she has no husband, even if she did, she's too old to have more sons; and even she had sons immediately that night, of course these young widows couldn't wait until they grew up - it would be too late! So, she says, "go back home!" But then she ramps her arguments up, in v.13: "No my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." In other words, she's saying that God is against, and that if they stick with her, they'll continue to have God against them too - and who would want that? Now, note that Naomi is beginning to blame God for her troubles here, and grow bitter - we'll come back to that later. But suffice it to say: she's wrong; God is not against her. Yes, God is sovereign over all that has happened so far; yes, even in allowing these tragic things to happen as consequences and judgment against sin - but that does not mean God is against her! On the contrary, God's kind and gracious providence for Naomi is at work in all these things, even though she can't see it yet!

But we see a glimpse of this in the amazing way that Ruth responds. Orpah goes back home, but Ruth remains, clinging loyally and faithfully to Naomi. In vv.15-18 we read: "And [Naomi] said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.'"

This is poetic and beautiful, isn't it? A beautiful, sweet, tender moment, of a refreshing display of steadfast love, loving kindness in Ruth for Naomi! She selflessly chooses to do the hard thing - to go with Naomi to a foreign land, against all odds, even though it looks like nothing is in it for her. She's willing to leave her entire life behind! That alone is a wonder - its hard to find such an example of love and kindness in any age, especially in the dark days of the judges, in a foreign, pagan land! This, too, is God's hand of grace at work for Naomi. But God is at work here in an even more significant way as well: what we see here is nothing less than *Ruth's conversion*.

Back in the Old Testament, you became of one God's people by having faith in God's promises and being part of God's people - which was the nation and people of Israel. And here, Ruth is proclaiming that is rejecting her Moabite identity - leaving behind her family, people, and pagan gods - in order to truly be part of Naomi's family, the people of Israel, and to follow and have faith in Israel's God - Yahweh, the only true God. This is a picture of radical conversion. Conversion looks different for us today, in the Church Age - but it is *just as necessary and radical for us* as we see here with Ruth. Now that Jesus Christ has come, we become part of God's people by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, believing He is the God-Man, who perfectly obeyed where we have failed, died on the cross for our sins, bearing the judgment of God that we deserve, and rose again on the third day, so that whoever repents and believes in Him will be forgiven, become part of God's people and Kingdom, and saved from God's judgment! And this salvation is *good news* because it is salvation based wholly on God's love, kindness, and grace - not based on what you or I do! Salvation is God's work of sovereign grace, from beginning to end. But at the exact same time, it's also a demand for us to *respond to it* - conversion is both God's work of grace in our lives, but also a *radical transformation of our lives*.

If you're not a Christian this morning, then Ruth's conversion is an example for you to follow! Turn away from your former of life of living for sin, of following after false gods and false beliefs, and doing what's right in your eyes; turn to Christ, and trust in Him alone as your sovereign ruler and gracious savior, and you will be saved! And if you are a Christian, then Ruth's example is still applicable for me and you, because it reminds us that conversion - becoming a believer - means we are to lived *changed lives*, being continually transformed by God's grace at work in us. Every day, we're called to forsake the ways of sin and this world, and to obey God, trusting in His sovereign authority over our lives. A life of faith means daily trusting, loving, obeying, and worshiping God alone! But it also means we are part of a *new people* - God's people! Just as Ruth renounced her Moabite identity and became part of ISrael, so we become part of the people of God - the Church, Christ's bride and body! So let commit to daily living out our conversion, living for God alone and living as part of God's people, His church. Let us prioritize Christ and His Church! And we do this *because of God's grace at work in our lives*. Such conversion is the evidence of God's sovereign grace at work.

But there always remains the danger that we don't recognize God's kind providence. Which brings us to our third and final point...

III. God's Sovereignty is Not a Reason for us to be Bitter and Blame God, but is instead a Reason to Trust Him (1:19-22)

At this point in the story clearly recognizes that God is in control over, that none of these events in her life are outside the scope of God's sovereignty; she's believes that - but instead of that being a comfort to her, or a good thing, she takes it as a sign that God is against her, and she becomes bitter and angry with God. She blames God for all the tragic events happening in her life. Look back at v.13, where she stated: "for it is exceedingly *bitter to me* for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." But surely, after seeing God's hand of provision, bringing food back to Israel, that she gets to go home, especially after Ruth's incredible profession of steadfast love and faithfulness to her - surely after this, Naomi will see God's kindness towards her, right? But no, that's not what happens.

We see this as the story continues, in vv.19-22. Naomi makes it back to her hometown, back to Bethlehem in Israel. She's been gone a long time, at least 10 years, and everyone is surprised to see her. In surprise, the women ask each other, "Is this Naomi?" (v.19). But Naomi gives a jarring response: "She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'" In Hebrew, Naomi's name means "pleasant," but she says, "Don't call me that any more - call me *bitter*." Naomi is bitter because she is angry with God and blames Him for all that has happened to her. Yes, she rightly recognizes that God is sovereign in control; but she wrongly applies this idea. She grows angry with God, blaming Him for what has happened, rather than believing that God is *good, righteous, and just* in all that He does. In fact, Naomi has grown so bitter and angry that she's no longer able to see how this sovereign God is also bringing about kindness and grace in her life! She wants to blame GOd for the bad but not thank Him for the good, let alone trust Him with the future. She says she went away "full" but now she's "empty" - but that's just not true! She left Bethlehem not full, but *starving*, with an empty belly, because a famine was going on! And coming back, she's not as empty as she thinks! On the one hand, it's completely understandable why she's so upset and feels like her life is empty, isn't it? She tragically lost her husband and both children - who wouldn't feel a deep sense of sorrow and emptiness after that? And yet, at the same time, she's not coming back completely empty. Not only is her belly full, but Ruth is by her side! Ruth has proven to be a

loyal, faithful, loving daughter, beyond comparison! A testament to God's kindness! But we don't see any mention of Ruth here, do we? Naomi has grown so bitter and angry with God that she's blind to all the ways God is graciously blessing her.

Can you relate to how Naomi feels here? Have you ever gone through times of suffering and sorrow, where you started to question how God could have let such things happen? Have you ever been tempted to grow bitter and angry with God? Maybe you're in such a place right now. Maybe you, too, blame God for bad things that have happened in your life. Maybe you've grown bitter and angry to the point where you can no longer see all of the ways God is working in the circumstances in your life *for good*.

When storms of suffering and grief come into our life, it's natural for us to be overwhelmed with emotion and pain. Even believers sometimes struggle with questions and doubts in such moments. But we must take great care to not grow bitter or angry with the Lord, but to *trust Him*, even in, *especially in* our most difficult moments. Yes, God is sovereign in control over all things - but that doesn't mean that the bad things that happen are His fault, as if we should blame Him. Of course not! God is perfectly good, holy, righteous, just, blameless, loving, kind, and gracious in all that He does! The blame for evil and sin does not go to God - it goes to sinners, like us. Because God is both sovereign *and perfectly good, gracious and loving*, God's sovereignty is a *good thing* - in fact, it should be an unspeakable comfort for us! It's not a reason to get angry - it's a reason to trust God, to trust that no matter how bad your circumstances look, if you're part of God's people in Christ through faith, then you can trust that the sovereign God behind all things is working out His kindness and grace for you! As Romans 8:28 promises, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

The 18th century hymn writer, William Cowper, captured it well:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,*

*But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*³

Maybe your circumstances today seem like the opposite of good. Maybe it feels to you like God is angry at you, or absent all together, and you can't see any way for it to work for good. But God's Word assures us that we can trust God, because He is both sovereign, and abounds in steadfast love, faithfulness, kindness, and grace for all His people, for all who trust in Him through faith in Christ Jesus! GOD's sovereignty means that providence is not frowning at you - behind all the dark clouds, God is smiling in love at you, working out kindness and grace to you, in ways you can't even fathom! In fact, it just might be the case, that if you repent from your bitterness and anger at the Lord, that if you stop blaming God, but start trusting Him, then He just might open your eyes to allow you to see all of the many ways that He is at work in your life, even now! You just might start to see evidence of God's gracious providence, of kind and faithful love for you! And that's exactly what he's doing in Naomi's life, in the story of Ruth. As we'll see by the end of the book, God is at work to make Naomi *full* and *pleasant* again, even in bringing a new son and grandson into the picture! And we'll see, through that son will come a King - eventually, King Jesus, who brings redemption, salvation, and grace for His people - for all who trust in Him alone! So let us not grow bitter or angry with God, but let us trust Him in all things, for He is full of loving kindness for His people, and He is in control! He has brought us salvation from our sins through Jesus Christ by grace! How much more so, then, can we trust Him with all the difficult circumstances of our lives, even when we don't understand them?

On the cloudiest stormy day, you can look up at the dark sky and know that, on the other side of those black clouds, the sun is still shining, whether you see it or not. And so it is, if you're a believer, no matter how dark and stormy your life may be, you can trust that the Lord who is behind it all is smiling upon you with you unfailing love and kindness toward you! For just as Ruth declares unflinching loyalty and love to Naomi, so the Lord promises to be faithful in steadfast love to His people.

Perhaps for some of you that means trusting in the Lord for the very first time. You, too, can trust in God's sovereign grace and kind providence in your life - simply turn to Jesus Christ, believe that He lived, died, and was raised to save you from your sins, ask Him to save you, and

³ From William Cowper's hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

He will! Trust in His grace! And then, make your faith public through baptism as you begin a new life of following GOD as part of His people. If that's you today, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.